

and hisses, like some brave little democracy driving back the Russian bear. Even so, the coyote's ready to rip out that valiant windpipe, when he too is distracted by the baddest mama on the marsh,

Old Miz Mountain Lion. He retreats, a kicked cur scampering away just as Miz Lion spots a beaver, and pounces like a tabby on a bug.

Again the rodent turns, an animated rug snarling, tail-slapping, roaring like a Tasmanian Devil till Miz Lion, "discouraged," slinks away —

and meets a skunk. "Oh no," we laugh, proud of our woodsy lore. Lady Skunk squirts a warning across Miz Lion's bow — then two more

squirts, to wound, not kill. Kitty keeps coming. No jury in the country could claim excessive force now as Lady Skunk looses a broadside. Miz Lion

rolls, screaming, paws clawing her eyes, muzzle tunneling through meadow grass like Horatio. Hound, snout full of cartoon cactus spines.

We grin at Nature's comedy, intent as ospreys on the flashing tube, while through our windows, gray whales breach off Long Beach Harbor,

chased by humans screeching, "Thar she blows," and Great White Sharks prowl each year closer to shore, feasting on sea lions and surfers,

and our city streets and alleys, Ferraris and flophouses run red, and every minute someone's raped or shot dead, and every ten

poor Marlon Perkins, just back from cancer surgery, introduces Mutual of Omaha, and smiling warmly, drives the hearse up to our double-bolted doors.

WHAT MISERY LOVES

A: So how've you been?

B: Incredible. I've had seven good days.

A: Seven good days. I haven't had seven good days in seven months.

B: Well, they weren't exactly good. More like passable.

- A: What I'd give for seven passable days.
- B: You realize that, for me, "passable" means a day I don't throw up my breakfast, I'm so depressed.
- A: For me, passable is a day I don't have a full-scale panic attack and have to run home and hide under the bed.
- B: Of course, my seven "good" days came after a year of living hell. Not a day went by I didn't want to chop off my fingers one by one and feed them to my piranha.
- A: I gave away my piranha and got some tapeworms — to sort of symbolize lingering pain.
- B: Last year was an improvement, actually! The year before, I hanged myself twice, overdosed on aspirin a dozen times, and jumped in front of a train, the 1:05 from San Jose. It would've killed me if it had been on time.
- A: I stuck my head in the oven last week, and nearly died. They say I still have some brain damage.
- B: Remember my trip to Three Mile Island? It affected my lungs and liver and kidneys. That trip took five years off my life. Conservatively.
- A: I'd welcome five years off my "life." It's been decades since I've had a good laugh.
- B: I never laugh. I barely smirk.
- A: A sneer is elation for me.
- B: I'm lucky if I don't break down in tears.
- A: I'm fortunate if I make three days without a nervous breakdown.
- B: I'm ecstatic if I don't go catatonic on the spot, and require hospitalization.
- A: I'm really blissful if I don't go into a coma, and stay that way for months.
- B: I count myself blessed if I don't go into a coma, live on respirators for a year, and wind up with permanent brain damage and facial paralysis.
- A: I'm in heaven if I don't fall down dead, get resuscitated with massive brain damage that makes me a quadriplegic, and after years of living as a vegetable, die in agony.
- B: I'm positively beatified if I don't die after years of agony, going in and out of comas, screaming for days on end, withering, wasting away to sixty pounds, enduring every humiliating and painful test known to medicine, overhearing all my loved ones wishing I'd just

die so they could squander what money I have left;
then when I do die, come back reincarnated as a dung
beetle.

A: Well, I've got to go. Call you tomorrow — if I
make it home.

B: Good to see you. I'll be here — if I last the night.

HONEY, I'M BACK

here in the Cottage of Suspended Desires.
After two weeks in the Mansion of Agonizing Need,
what a relief to sink, clam-like, into this worn chair
and not think of the hammocks and peeled grapes
and dancing girls limber as ferns,
which are the good points of the Mansion,
the bad being that the girls are lesbians,
can run faster than I,
and have razor blades in all my favorite spots.

With any luck I'll just stay here,
lulled by the scent of last night's casserole,
sipping warm beer and looking forward
to the postman's bringing
the occasional ad for auto parts
or a limited edition set of pewter frogs,
but no more tickets to the Mansion
or the House of Desperate Longing,
no maps leading to the Palace of Skull-Crunching Despair.

GATHER YE ROSEBUDS WHILE YE MAY (BUT WATCH FOR PLASTIQUE
PETALS)

The worst thing about disasters
is not that they're so bad,
but that they're so damned unexpected.
I don't mean popular stuff:
the Big California Quake,
or standing on Ground Zero,
or even learning that your latest
headache is brain cancer. I
mean you're in your livingroom
watching The Love Boat,
when a runaway freight train
cuts off your legs;

you're
thirty feet from your apartment